



# Things To Come

**M**y last visit to the doctor started with a gaggle of “helpers,” women who scheduled and organized the doctor’s (and my) time. There were four of them, all very tightly wrapped. Their banter as they worked showed their pride in routinely dealing with events that terrified the rest of us. They were a great convenience to the doctor, but less so to me; my role was to wait. No consolation by the gentle family doctor here.

On the other hand, the power this social machinery brings to bear on my health is formidable. Where the gentle old doctor had little to offer in terms of real cures for real diseases, this machine can and often does make a real improvement. Technology has its benefits and its dark side. I miss the courtesy and convenience of the family doctor, but I value my access to better health care.

No progress is without some cost. In medicine, we’re struggling to make progress in human factors that keeps pace with technological progress and we’re losing ground. And, technology’s

by J.C. Kellett

pressure on progress isn’t limited to medicine, even recreation is affected.

Older pastimes now seem quaint. . . like the care lavished on an ornamented carriage; the delight of stereo postcards; or the pride taken in the craftsmanship of a simple spring wound clock. It’s so mundane, compared to the enjoyment of the luxury of a modern touring sedan, the thrill of an IMAX movie, or the convenience of a pocket computer. How naive we were.

Time marches on! As our machines get more complex, our culture speeds up. There’s a sense that our machines make our culture better. . . that it’s all moving by natural laws toward some better system. In our heart of hearts, we really believe that, but it isn’t necessarily so.

Airplanes have grown rapidly into basic parts of our cultural infrastructure. No longer unreliable experiments or

just weapons of war, airplanes are now institutionalized into a system that moves millions of people. The common man — not the adventurer or the warrior — accepts that system as a part of his cultural birthright. There’s a whole industry of “helpers” like my doctor’s administrative staff, who take pride in dealing casually and profitably with a way of moving that used to terrify a lot of people. They’ve sold a perception of aviation that meets their needs.

Now, here we come, big boys and girls playing with our big toys (airplanes). Throwbacks, in a sense, of an earlier time in aviation. After all, gliders were starting points toward “real” flying. It’s logical, isn’t it, to assume all aviation fits into a sequence of growth, advancement, improvement, from Lillenthal to the Concorde. Newer, faster, higher is better. . . right?

So it makes sense to the public that beginnings make way for endings. The perceived cultural needs for aviation require standards of safety, speed and size that displace such antique ideas

of flying as the single engine, sport planes, the gliders, the people who fly for fun. (FUN? Flying should be purposeful, and done by highly skilled professionals. Does one practice medicine for fun?)

Soaring pilots are at risk of becoming the twentieth century equivalents of blacksmiths ranting at the immorality of the automobile. Are recreational pilots, like cockfighters, pursuing a pleasure repugnant to modern society? Are we obsolete? Why do we insist on taking our private pleasure at the expense of the public safety? Isn't this line of thinking insidious? Don't you sense a certain sense of truth in your gut?

It is easy for such perceptions to become established in our culture. There are more than a few pilots who sincerely believe this construction, and most non-pilots believe it. And a lot of media pundits. There is a cultural momentum based on perception; on complex fundamental beliefs that are seemingly unrelated, on financial self-interest, and on emotions. It is the same momentum that makes rock stars into seers, and puts fins on cars. It is the kind of perception that makes television more real than life, and makes images into leaders.

It comes easily to mind that society could put all this into better perspective

through education. Jefferson observed that it's better to increase the erudition of the masses than to try to dominate them. There are many facts for education to use; there really are fewer airplanes flying today than ten years ago; the goal of a perfectible system is thermodynamically impossible; the segregation of aircraft is possible with economy and efficiency without grounding those flown for fun; 1986 was the safest year for general aviation since the NTSB started collecting data. There's also the "moral fact" that finding pleasure in the sensations of flight is not a perversion.

But, wait. Cultural momentum isn't shaped by facts, it's shaped by perceptions. Facts rarely change perceptions. The basic principles of physics are not moving our culture forward toward a future that we can assume is better than our past. There is nothing in biology that dictates that modern medical care is effective only if it involves dehumanizing, blathering front office staff. It is that way because of the economic self-interest of the practitioners. We accept that front office staff as an assumed price to pay for the availability of the services behind that staff. It doesn't necessarily have to be so... we permit it to be so.

If all this is true, then a future that

includes individual men and women (not just corporate collectives) pursuing a passion for flight is just as plausible. It is a future in which people can safely fly, over long distances and at great heights, in an environment that includes fighters, bombers, satellite launchers, gliders and airliners. One in which basic principles of a logic are used in designing a system that serves all pilots. But, tools in addition to education must be used to change the direction of cultural momentum.

What kind of tools? We have to turn to what tools have been shown to re-direct our cultural momentum. Crafting popular opinion is at best difficult and always risky. But, the alternatives are all worse. The judgment and perception of pilots on aviation issues is a higher quality judgment than non-pilots; our judgment and perception deserve more weight than talk-show hosts. We must more directly claim our right to that power.

Things like Chris Woods' lovely films are part of the toolbox. But, it's up to us, all of us, to use those tools. Get them aired on TV. Peddle influence. Jawbone policy makers. Complain and complain loudly that your ox is being gored. Get political. Sell soaring. Shape perceptions.

Not only are you correct, you're right! ■